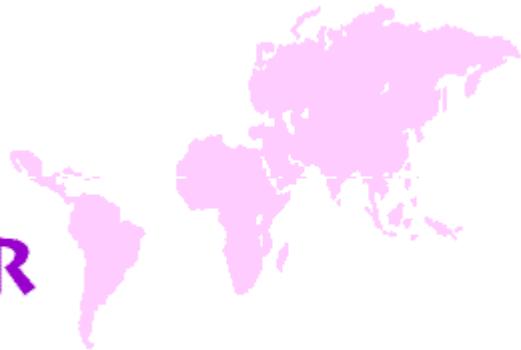


# THIRD WORLD TRAVELER



## U.S. Aggression & Propaganda Against Cuba

### Why the unrelieved U.S. antagonism toward Cuba?

by Michael Parenti

Z magazine, September 2004



In recent times, U.S.-Cuban relations have gone from bad to worse. Under the Administration of George W. Bush, the U.S. boycott has been more stringently imposed. Anti-government agitation within Cuba has been financed and directed by the U.S. interest section in Havana. State Department restrictions on travel to the island have become tighter than ever. Most ominously of all, in early 2003 U.S. pundits began openly talking about invading Cuba—a discussion that was temporarily put on hold only after the invasion of Iraq proved so costly.

For over four decades Washington policymakers have treated Cuba with unrelieved antagonism. U.S. rulers and their faithful acolytes in the major media have propagated every sort of misrepresentation to mislead the world as regards their policy of aggression toward Cuba. Why?

#### Defending Global Capitalism

In June 1959, some five months after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, the Havana government promulgated an agrarian reform law that provided for state appropriation of large private landholdings. Under this law, U.S. sugar corporations eventually lost about 1,666,000 acres of choice land and many millions of dollars in future cash-crop exports. The following year, President Dwight Eisenhower, citing Havana's "hostility" toward the United States, cut Cuba's sugar quota by about 95 percent, in effect imposing a total boycott on publicly produced Cuban sugar. Three months later, in October 1959, the Cuban government nationalized all banks and large commercial and industrial enterprises, including the many that belonged to U.S. firms.

**Cuba's move away from a free-market system dominated by U.S. firms and toward a not-for-profit socialist economy caused it to become the target of an unremitting series of attacks perpetrated by the U.S. national security state. These attacks included U.S.-sponsored sabotage, espionage, terrorism, hijackings, trade sanctions, embargo, and outright invasion. The purpose behind this aggression was to undermine the Revolution and deliver Cuba safely back to the tender mercies of global capitalism.**

**The U.S. policy toward Cuba has been consistent with its longstanding policy of trying to subvert any country that pursues an alternative path in the use of its land, labor, capital, markets, and natural resources. Any nation or political movement that emphasizes self-development, egalitarian human services, and public ownership is condemned as an enemy and targeted for sanctions or other forms of attack. In contrast, the countries deemed "friendly toward America" and "pro-West" are those that leave themselves at the disposal of large U.S. investors on terms that are totally favorable to the moneyed corporate interests.**

**Of course, this is not what U.S. rulers tell the people of North America. As early as July 1960, the White House charged that Cuba was "hostile" to the United States (despite the Cuban government's repeated overtures for normal friendly relations). The Castro government, in Eisenhower's words, was "dominated by international communism." U.S. officials repeatedly charged that the island government was a cruel dictatorship and that the United States had no choice but to try "restoring" Cuban liberty.**

**U.S. rulers never explained why they were so suddenly concerned about the freedoms of the Cuban people. In the two decades before the Revolution, successive Administrations in Washington manifested no opposition to the brutally repressive autocracy headed by General Fulgencio Batista. Quite the contrary, they sent him military aid, did a vigorous business with him, and treated him well in every other way. The significant but unspoken difference between Castro and Batista was that Batista, a comprador ruler, left Cuba wide open to U.S. capital penetration. In contrast, Castro and his revolutionary movement did away with private corporate control of the economy, nationalized U.S. holdings, and renovated the class structure toward a more collectivized and egalitarian mode.**

**Needless to say, the U.S. method of mistreatment has been applied to other countries besides Cuba. Numerous potentially dissident regimes that have asked for friendly relations have been met with abuse and aggression from Washington: Vietnam, Chile (under Allende), Mozambique, Angola,**

**Cambodia, Nicaragua (under the Sandinistas), Panama (under Torrijo), Grenada (under the New Jewel Movement), Yugoslavia (under Milosevic), Haiti (under Aristide), Venezuela (under Chavez), and numerous others.**

**The U.S. modus operandi is:**

**\* heap criticism on the targeted government for imprisoning the butchers, assassins, terrorists, and torturers of the previous U.S.-backed reactionary regime**

**\* denounce the revolutionary or reformist government as "totalitarian" for failing to immediately institute Western-style, electoral politics**

- \* **launch ad hominem attacks upon the leader, labeling him or her as fanatical, brutal, repressive, genocidal, power hungry, or even mentally imbalanced**
- \* **denounce the country as a threat to regional peace and stability**
- \* **harass, destabilize, and impose economic sanctions to cripple its economy**
- \* **attack it with surrogate forces, trained, equipped, and financed by the U.S. and led by members of the former regime, or even with regular U.S. armed forces**

## **Manipulating Public Opinion**

**How the corporate-owned capitalist press has served in the crusade against Cuba tells us a lot about why the U.S. public is so misinformed about issues relating to that country. Following the official White House line, the corporate news media regularly denies that the United States harbors aggressive designs against Cuba or any other government. The stance taken against Cuba, it was said, was simply a defense against communist aggrandizement. Cuba was repeatedly condemned as a tool of Soviet aggression and expansionism. But now that the Soviet Union no longer exists, Cuba is still treated as a mortal enemy. U.S. acts of aggression-including armed invasion-continue to be magically transformed into acts of defense.**

**Consider the Bay of Pigs. In April 1961, about 1,600 right-wing Cuban émigrés, trained and financed by the CIA, and assisted by hundreds of U.S. "advisors," invaded Cuba. In the words of one of their leaders, Manuel de Varona (as quoted in the New York Daily News, January 8, 1961), their intent was to overthrow Castro and set up "a provisional government" that "will restore all properties to the rightful owners." Reports of the impending invasion circulated widely throughout Central America. In the United States, however, few people were informed. The mounting evidence of an impending invasion was suppressed by the Associated Press and United Press International and by all the major newspapers and newsmagazines-in an impressively unanimous act of self-censorship.**

**Fidel Castro's accusation that U.S. rulers were planning to invade Cuba was dismissed by the New York Times as "shrill... anti-American propaganda," and by Time magazine as Castro's "continued tawdry little melodrama of invasion." When Washington broke diplomatic relations with Cuba in January 1961, the New York Times explained, "What snapped U.S. patience was a new propaganda offense from Havana charging that the U.S. was plotting an 'imminent invasion' of Cuba." In fact, the Bay of Pigs invasion proved to be something more than a figment of Fidel Castro's imagination.**

**Such is the predominance of the anti-communist orthodoxy in U.S. public life that, after the Bay of Pigs, there was a total lack of critical discussion among U.S. political figures and media commentators regarding the moral and legal impropriety of the invasion. Instead, commentary focused exclusively on tactical questions. There were repeated references to the disappointing "fiasco" and "disastrous attempt" and the need to free Cuba from the "communist yoke." It was never acknowledged that the invasion failed not because of "insufficient air coverage," as some of the invaders claimed, but because the Cuban people, instead of rising to join the counterrevolutionary expeditionary force as anticipated by U.S. leaders, closed ranks behind their Revolution.**

**Among the Cuban-exile invaders taken prisoner near the Bay of Pigs (according to the Cuban government) were people whose families between them had previously owned in Cuba 914,859 acres of land, 9,666 houses, 70 factories, 5 mines, 2 banks, and 10 sugar mills. They were the scions of the privileged propertied class of pre-revolutionary Cuba, coming back to reclaim their substantial holdings. But in the U.S. media they were represented as dedicated champions of liberty-who had lived so comfortably and uncomplainingly under the Batista dictatorship.**

**Why would the Cuban people stand by the "Castro dictatorship?" That was never explained in the United States. Not a word appeared in the U.S. press about the advances made by Cubans under the Revolution, the millions who for the first time had access to education, literacy, medical care, decent housing, jobs with adequate pay and good work conditions, and a host of other public services-all of which are far from perfect, but still offer a better life than the free-market misery endured under the U.S. -Batista régime.**

**Because of the U.S. embargo, Cuba has the highest import-export tonnage costs of any country in the world, having to buy its school buses and medical supplies from Japan and other far-off places. Better relations with the U.S. would bring the Cubans more trade, technology, and tourism, and the chance to cut their defense expenditures. Yet Havana's overtures for friendlier relations have been repeatedly rebuffed by successive administrations in Washington.**

**If the U.S. government justifies its hostility on the grounds that Cuba is hostile toward the United States, what becomes the justification when the Cuban government tries to be friendly? The response is to emphasize the negative. Even when reporting the cordial overtures made by Cuba, U.S. media pundits and Washington policymakers perpetuate the stereotype of a sinister "Marxist regime" as the manipulative aggressor. On August 1, 1984 the New York Times ran a "news analysis" headlined "What's Behind Castro's Softer Tone." The headline suggested that Castro was up to something. The opening sentence read, "Once again Fidel Castro is talking as if he wants to improve relations with the United States" ("as if" not actually). According to the Times, Castro was interested in "taking advantage" of U.S. trade, technology, and tourism and would "prefer not to be spending so much time and energy on national defense." Here seemed to be a promising basis for improved relations. Fidel Castro was saying that Cuba's own self-interest rested on friendlier diplomatic and economic ties with Washington and not, as the United States claimed, on military buildups and aggressive confrontations. Nevertheless, the Times analysis made nothing of Castro's stated desire to ease tensions and instead presented the rest of the story from the U. S. government's perspective. It noted that most Washington officials "seem skeptical .... The Administration continues to believe that the best way to deal with the Cuban leader is with unyielding firmness .... Administration officials see little advantage in wavering."**

**The article did not explain what justified this "skeptical" stance or why a blanket negative response to Castro should be described as "unyielding firmness" rather than, say, "unyielding rigidity." Nor did it say why a willingness to respond seriously to his overture must be labeled "wavering." The impression is that the power-hungry Castro was out to get something from us but our leaders weren't about to be taken in. There was no explanation of what the United States had to lose if it entered friendlier relations with Cuba.**

**In short, the U.S. stance is immune to evidence. If the Cubans condemn U.S. aggressions, this is proof of their hostility and diabolic design. If they act in a friendly manner and ask for negotiated settlements, showing a willingness to make concessions, then it is assumed they are up to something and are resorting to deceptively manipulative ploys. The U.S. position is nonfalsifiable: both A and not-A become proof of the same thing.**

### Double Standard "Democracy"

**U.S. policymakers have long condemned Cuba for its controlled press. The Cubans, we are told, are subjected to a totalitarian indoctrination and do not enjoy the diverse and open discourse that is said to be found in the "free and independent" U.S. media. In fact, the average Cuban has more access to Western news sources than the average U.S. citizen has to Cuban sources. The same was true of the former Soviet Union. In 1985 Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev pointed out that U.S. television programs, movies, books, music, and magazines were in relative abundance in the USSR compared to the almost nonexistent supply of Soviet films and publications in the United States. He offered to stop jamming Voice of America broadcasts to his country if Washington would allow normal frequency transmission of Radio Moscow to the U.S., an offer the U.S. government declined.**

**Likewise, Cuba is bombarded with U.S. broadcasting, including Voice of America, regular Spanish-language stations from Miami, and a U.S.-sponsored propaganda station called "Radio Marti." Havana has asked that Cuba be allowed a frequency for Cuban use in the United States, something Washington has refused to do. In response to those who attack the lack of dissent in the Cuban media, Fidel Castro has promised to open up the Cuban press to all opponents of the Revolution on the day he saw U.S. Communists enjoying regular access to the U.S. major media. Needless to say, U.S. rulers have never taken up the offer.**

**Cuba has also been condemned for not allowing its people to flee the island. That so many want to leave Cuba is treated as proof that Cuban socialism is a harshly repressive system, rather than that the U.S. embargo has made life difficult in Cuba. That so many millions more want to leave capitalist countries like Mexico, Nigeria, Poland, El Salvador, Philippines, South Korea, Macedonia, and others too numerous to list is never treated as grounds for questioning the free-market system that inflicts such misery on the Third World.**

**In accordance with an agreement between Havana and Washington, the Cuban government allowed people to leave for the United States if they had a U.S. visa. Washington had agreed to issue 20,000 visas a year, but granted few, preferring to incite illegal departures and reap the propaganda value. Cubans who fled illegally on small crafts or hijacked vessels and planes were hailed as heroes who had risked their lives to flee Castro's tyranny and were granted asylum in the U.S. When Havana announced it would let anyone leave who wanted to, the Clinton administration reverted to a closed door policy, fearing an immigration tide. Now policymakers voiced concerns that the escape of too many disgruntled refugees would help Castro stay in power by easing tensions within Cuban society. Cuba is condemned for not allowing its citizens to leave and then for allowing them to leave.**

**Lacking a class perspective, all sorts of experts come to conclusions about Cuba based on surface appearances. While attending a World Affairs Council meeting in San Francisco, I heard some participants refer to the irony of Cuba's having come "full circle" since the days before the Revolution. In pre-revolutionary Cuba, the best hotels and shops were reserved for foreigners and the relatively few Cubans who had U.S. dollars. Today, it is the same, these experts gleefully observed.**

**This judgment overlooks some important differences. Strapped for hard currency, the revolutionary government decided to take advantage of its beautiful beaches and sunny climate to develop a tourist industry. Today, tourism is one of Cuba's most important sources of hard currency income, if not the most important. True, tourists are given accommodations that most Cubans cannot afford. But in pre-revolutionary Cuba, the profits from tourism were pocketed by corporations, generals, gamblers, and mobsters. Today the profits are split between the foreign investors who build and manage the hotels and the Cuban government. The portion going to the government helps pay for health clinics, education, machinery, the importation of fuel, and the like. In other words, the people reap much of the benefits of the tourist trade-as is true of the export earnings from Cuban sugar, coffee, tobacco, rum, seafood, honey, nickel, and marble.**

**If Cuba were in exactly the same place as before the Revolution, completely under client-state servitude, Washington would have lifted the embargo and embraced Havana, as it has done to some degree with China and Vietnam-both of whom are energetically encouraging the growth of a low-wage, private investment sector. When the Cuban government no longer utilizes the public sector to redistribute a major portion of the surplus to the population, when it allows the surplus wealth to be pocketed by a few rich corporate owners, and when it returns the factories and lands to an opulent owning class-as the former communist countries of Eastern Europe have done-then it will have come full circle, returning to a privatized, free-market, client-state servitude. Only then will it be warmly embraced by Washington.**

**In 1994, I wrote a letter to Representative Lee Hamilton, chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, urging a normalization of relations with Cuba. He wrote back that U.S. policy toward Cuba should be "updated" in order to be more effective and that "we must put Cuba in contact with the ideas and practice of democracy... and the economic benefits of a free market system." The embargo, Hamilton went on, was put in place to "promote democratic change in Cuba and retaliate for the large-scale seizure of American assets by the Castro regime."**

**Needless to say, Hamilton did not explain why his own government-which had supported a pre-revolutionary dictatorship in Cuba for generations-was now so insistent on installing U.S.-style democracy on the island. The revealing thing in his letter was his acknowledgment that Washington's policy was dedicated to advancing the cause of the "free market system" and retaliating for the "large-scale seizure of American assets."**

**Those who do not believe that U.S. rulers are consciously dedicated to the propagation of capitalism should note how policymakers explicitly press for "free-market reforms" in one country after another (including today in Serbia and Iraq). We no longer have to impute such intentions to them. Almost all their actions and-with increasing frequency-their own words testify to what they have been doing. When forced to choose between democracy without capitalism or capitalism without democracy, U.S. rulers unhesitatingly embrace**

**the latter-although they also prefer the legitimating cloak of a limited and well-controlled "democracy" when possible.**

**All this should remind us that the greatest enemies of peace and democracy are not in Havana; they are in Washington.**

**Michael Parenti 's most recent books are The Assassination of Julius Caesar (2003) and Superpatriotism (2004)**

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**● Caribbean watch**

**● Michael Parenti page**

**● Index of Website**

**● Home Page**